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Let's advocate for mammography and breast self-exam

Filed under [FORCE HEALTH AND SAFETY](#), [HEATH](#), [U.S. MARINE CORPS](#) (NO COMMENTS)

By Nikki Levinson-Lustgarten, R.N., Breast Care Coordinator, Naval Hospital Jacksonville



Breast cancer is the second-most common cancer (after skin cancer) in American women, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

When a woman hears the words “breast cancer,” the world narrows dramatically. Though not the leading cause of death in women, it’s one that can dramatically affect her quality of life and relationships.

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While most breast cancers occur in women 50 and over, about 11 percent of new cases are found in women younger than 45.


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according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. While most breast cancers occur in women 50 and over, about 11 percent of new cases are found in women younger than 45.

Each year more than 220,000 people are diagnosed with breast cancer and 40,000 die from it. One percent of these are men. While the incidence has remained steady, the death rate has dropped—due in large part to the tremendous effort made to encourage women to have annual mammograms.

I'm a strong advocate of breast self exam (BSE) and mammography. Despite the controversy over mammography frequency, women continue to vote with their breasts and have one annually. And since a cancer may have been developing for five to seven years before it can be identified on a mammogram, monthly BSE is crucial.



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Some cancers found on mammograms look like tiny grains of salt or sand. This includes ductal carcinoma in-situ (often called pre-cancerous), which has a greater than 95 percent cure rate. While the majority of breast cancers start in the ducts, some begin in the lobules—the glands that produce milk. Lobular cancer is very difficult to detect with traditional mammography because it's less likely to cause a firm breast lump. It often appears as a thickening of the tissue, a new area of fullness, or a swelling or change in the texture of the skin (such as dimpling).

Treatment for breast cancer generally includes surgery, chemotherapy, hormone medication, and possibly radiation therapy. Surgery ranges from a simple lumpectomy (removing only the affected tissue) to removing both breasts (mastectomy) with reconstruction. Advances have allowed oncologists to better identify tumor components and treatments. No longer is everyone getting toxic medications. Some may take a hormone-blocking medication for five to seven years, while others have chemotherapy that's less physically taxing. Even radiation has become more targeted, with less disruption to other body parts such as the heart and lungs.

To help reduce your risk of breast cancer:

- Keep a [healthy weight](#).
- [Exercise regularly](#)—at least four hours a week.
- Get enough [sleep](#).
- Don't drink [alcohol](#), or limit alcoholic drinks to no more than one per day.
- Avoid exposure to [chemicals that can cause cancer](#).
- Try to reduce your [exposure to radiation](#) during imaging tests (like X-rays, CT scans, PET scans, mammograms).If you're



Try to reduce your exposure to radiation during imaging tests

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considering [hormone replacement therapy](#) or birth control pills, ask your doctor about the risk and if it's right for you. For hormone therapy, it's usually recommended to use the lowest dose needed for as short a time as possible.

- [Breastfeed](#) your baby, if possible.

(like X-rays, CT scans, PET scans, mammograms).If you're considering hormone replacement therapy or birth control pills, ask your doctor about the risk and if it's right for you.

It used to be a celebration when breast cancer patients reached the five-year mark. While some breast cancers can recur within two years, we're now looking to the 10-, 15- or 20-year survival mark.

What else can we do? Particularly during October, Breast Cancer Awareness Month, let's celebrate the research and technologies that have allowed people diagnosed with breast cancer to live longer, with fewer problems and side effects. Let's continue to advocate for annual mammograms and monthly BSE. Let's grow closer to our families who have supported us and the communities that have fought for us. Let's continue to be the best we can possibly be and achieve the dream of a cure—something I'm passionate about, as a survivor of my mother's breast cancer.

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